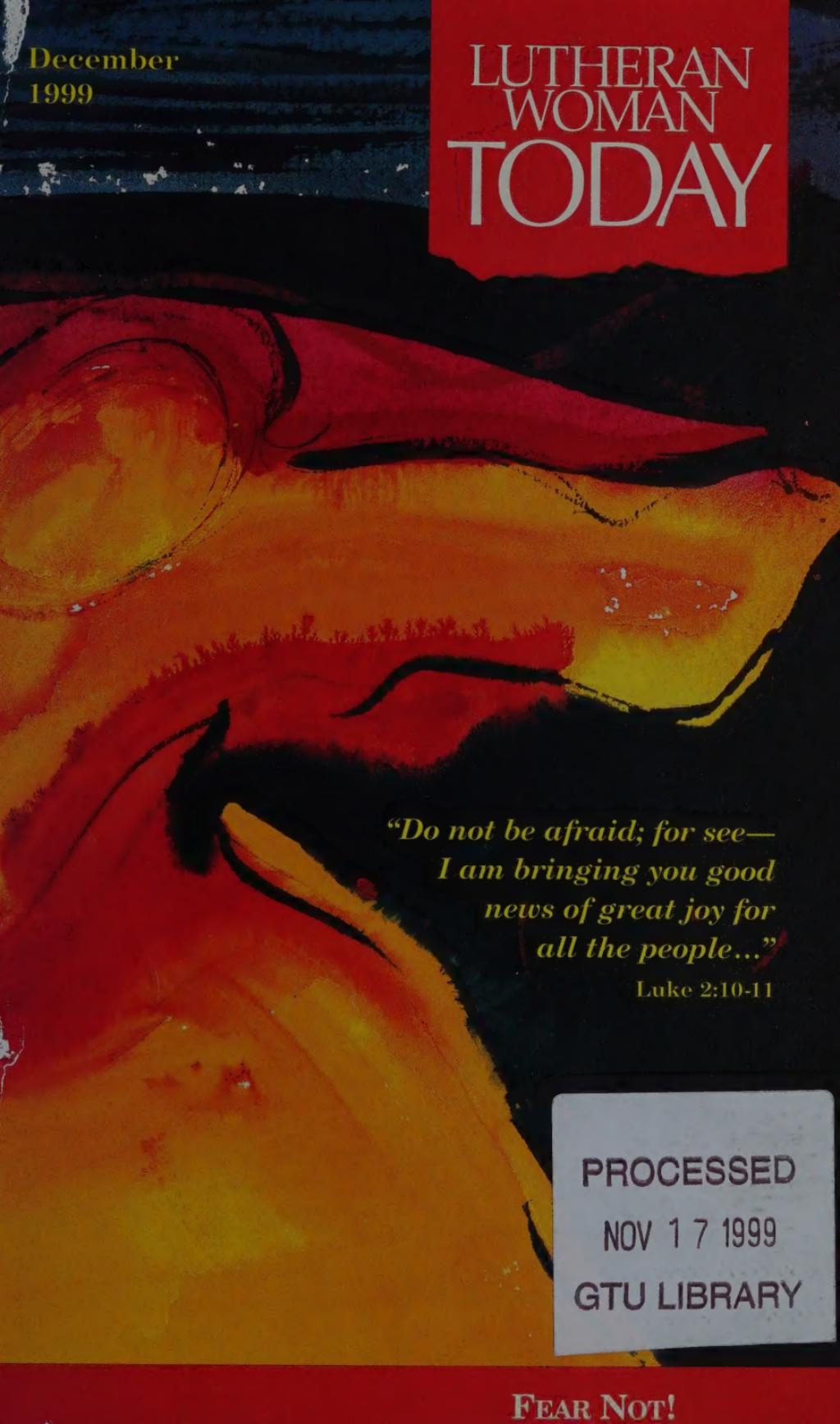


December
1999

LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY



*"Do not be afraid; for see—
I am bringing you good
news of great joy for
all the people..."*

Luke 2:10-11

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FEAR NOT!

BRIEF PRAYERS ON NEWS ITEMS

Sonia C. Solomonsen

Don't feel helpless when you hear news stories. Instead, pray for people and concerns as you learn of them in the news. Add these people to your prayer list.

DEBT-FREE BY 2000

Women of the ELCA, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, and the Lutheran World Federation all have affirmed support for Jubilee 2000, which seeks to provide debt relief for the world's poorest countries. Jubilee 2000 urges the world's industrialized nations to respond to the debt crisis in a way that enables countries to enter the next millennium free from the burden of unsustainable debt.

God of Life, open our hearts to those burdened by debt.

SYNOD NOTES JUBILEE YEAR

The Pacifica Synod called for next year to be a Year of Jubilee. The measure enacted by synod assembly calls on each congregation and

ministry to come up with tangible expressions of jubilee. For example, congregations with debt-free property could borrow on the holding and give the dollars to the Jubilee fund. One congregation is conducting a building debt-reduction campaign and will donate a jubilee tithe from the monies.

Call forth our creativity in the coming jubilee year, O God of Love.

CELEBRATE THE HUNGER APPEAL

Congregations can still celebrate the ELCA World Hunger Appeal's 25th anniversary. They are encouraged to be creative in designing celebrations that might give, do, or dedicate 25 of something to the Hunger Appeal. The appeal has several resources you can use for your activities. Call the ELCA Resource Information Service at 800-638-3522 to request a single copy of the Hunger Appeal's resource packet.

You have blessed us. Make us a blessing to others, Loving God.

Sonia C. Solomonsen is managing editor of The Lutheran. LWT

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Fear not! It's great advice

I once heard a speaker at a women's meeting say there are at least 365 "fear not" verses—or its equivalent—in the Bible, "and that is enough to help us through every day in the year!"

I never did check out her math, scripturally, but the sum of her conclusion stays with me: God provides all the love and help we need to meet any challenge in life.

The authors in this "fear not" issue of *LWT* most heartily agree—and offer powerful witness to those of us who may at times tremble in life.

In "Fear not! A theme for all seasons" (p. 4), Susan Gamelin rehearses how God's messengers exist to keep us from capitulating to fear, with their repeated "liturgy of reassurance."

Ellen Gamrath's "The promise is presence" (p. 9) points out the power of that little word *for* that follows most of the fear-not passages in Scripture, as in the angel-to-shepherds message: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people."

Relax as you read Donna Hacker Smith's experience of strength in the community of God's people through her battle with breast cancer (p. 6), and know that the same power exists for you.

Don't miss two other practical gems: Tom McGrath's on-target

"Ten ways to disarm your fear" (p. 11) and Michael Cobbler's charming "A word fitly recalled" (p. 18) on the power and value of memorizing Bible verses, ending with 10 of his favorites "learned by heart." What would your top-ten list include?

Here are some other jewels in the issue: "TC'99 diary" (p. 43), two sample Advent devotions (p. 21), a new column on parenting and spirituality, "Mothering seasons" (p. 23), and the Genesis Bible study session, "God's unconditional promises" (p. 26).

This issue we also celebrate the happy arrival of Deb Bogaert, our new associate editor, who comes to us with rich experience in religious magazine publishing and a deep interest in the Bible and theology. Kate Sprutta Elliott, a valued part of *LWT* for four years, has moved to a new position within the ELCA as editor of *Seeds for the Parish* and the Action Packet.

We hope this issue leaves you "fearing not," for God's great love surrounds us all—always. All of us at *LWT* wish you a faith-filled, fear-not Christmas. Blessings! *LWT*

Nancy J. Stelling

Nancy J. Stelling
Editor
Lutheran Woman Today

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sky shine with the
glory of the Lord.
Imagine hearing
the angel's

Women of the ELCA IdeaNet

A helpful newsletter found in the middle of LWT.

There are church events that you go to, and there are those you wouldn't miss. Learn about "Be-there Events" in this issue.

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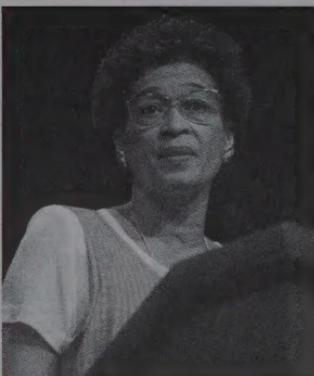
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Opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the writers and, except for the Women of the ELCA department and the Bible study, are not necessarily those of the Women of the ELCA.

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Fear not!

A theme for all seasons

Susan Gamelin

Those who speak to us on behalf of God see the fear in our faces. That's why they greet us so unusually when they show up in our lives, in the midst of all the other messengers who press themselves upon us. "Don't be afraid," God's messengers say to us when they open a conversation.

"Fear not," God's messengers call out quickly when sent to talk with us. "Don't be afraid," they trumpet when their assignment is to bring us good news of great joy. These are much better opening lines for folks whose hearts are racing with fear than the usual, "Hi, how are you?"

Or are they?

Was there anything more annoying when we were growing up than our moms telling us that we were silly to get so scared about taking a math test or not having a prom date? Or is there anything less comforting than friends who tell us to "think positive thoughts" when the monsters of loss lurk in the bushes?

That's exactly why we need to hear from God's messengers. Their "fear nots" are powerful words as they break into our "scared-ness" with the timbre of God's voice. These messengers' greetings are why we can move beyond fear to understanding and peace. "Fear not, for ...," they say, and continue on to announce God's good pleasure to be our shield, or to give us the kingdom, or to be with us through earthquake, wind, and fire.

We need to hear these words again and again. There is a liturgy of reassurance that is part of my marriage to my husband, Tim. Over the years, I have come to him at those times when I have begun to believe the forces of evil really are in control and my reasons for being afraid are valid, after all. "Tell me that the reign of God will come," I stand before Tim and urge. He knows just how serious I am when I make that request. He looks me squarely in the eye and tells me without hesitation that the kingdom of God will come, that God's promises are good. "Don't be afraid," he says to my fears. And even as he says these words he knows on other days I will be

back again, urging him to tell me once more the good news that God is in charge—I don't need to be afraid.

And those who speak for God do show up again and again, and greet our trembling selves with the words we want to hear: "Don't be afraid." These words are a theme for all seasons.

Zechariah and Mary hear them from the angels sent to announce the advent of our God (Luke 1:13 and 30). The Christmas angels sing these words as a prelude to their hymn to the shepherds—and to us (Luke 8:10).

As Jesus walks across the water, God-made-flesh calls out to calm our terror at the epiphany, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Mark 6:50).

Moses shouts into the Lenten wilderness over the roar of Pharaoh's chariot wheels, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today ..." (Exodus 14:13).

The angel who sits on the rolled-back stone at Easter's dawn doesn't have to shout. Instead the angel sings out into the freshness of a future wide open, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:5).

In the long Pentecost season of our discipleship and lives, Jesus tells us again and again not be to afraid, because from now on we will catch people (Luke 5:10), because 12-year-olds can be saved from death (Luke 8:50), because we are of more value to God than many sparrows (Luke 12:7), and because it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

Afraid? Us? After hearing these words of reassurance? Yes, human as we are; we are still afraid when the winds howl and the children weep and the doctor says, "Cancer." That is precisely why God sends messengers to speak to us when our teeth chatter and our knees knock. God knows us so well. And we stand before God again and again and listen to the precious words:

*Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

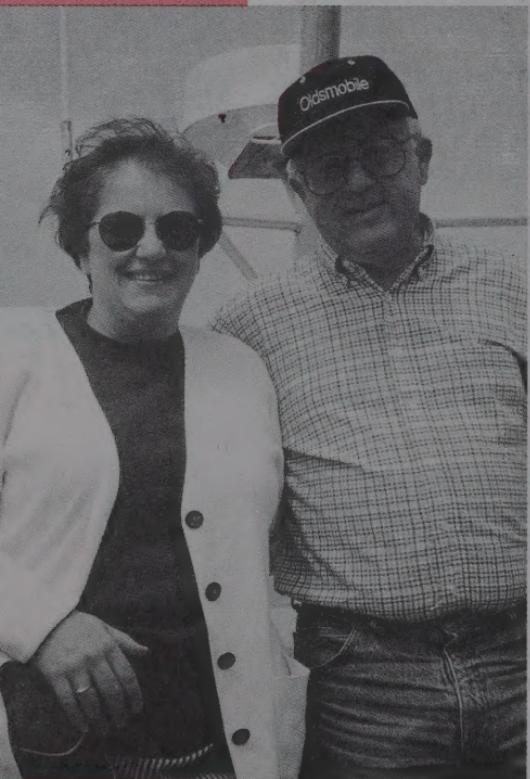
—Isaiah 41:10

These are words for all seasons for all of us. **LWT**

*Susan
Gamelin,
Atlanta, Ga., is
a wife, mother,
mother-in-law,
grandmother,
and the pastor
for leadership
in the ELCA's
Southeastern
Synod.*

Fear not fear

Donna Hacker Smith



The author and her husband, Larry, two months before her diagnosis.

"I'm really sorry, Donna. I wouldn't have said it was nothing had I realized ..."

I didn't need to hear the other compassionate words my doctor was saying. I understood immediately. The lump in my breast that a mere hour before he had suggested was "probably nothing" was obviously not "nothing." Rather, this little bit of abnormal tissue had propelled me to the other side of a vast divide, from the land of normalcy to the land of illness, and between those two territories is an ocean of fear.

Fear? Perhaps you are thinking as you read this, "She is a pastor. Surely she knows that God is in charge and that there is nothing to fear!" Well, friends, at the moment of that diagnosis, I felt the kind of cold, gut-wrenching, life-altering fear that is essential to our human nature. Facing an illness I did not understand, an uncertain future, and the possibility of pain and death, I had plenty to be afraid of, and I am not shy about admitting it.

Fear is a common and very real part of our human existence. Some fears are well-grounded in reality; a person facing a potentially fatal disease has good reason to be afraid. Other fears are less rational or are poorly focused. A life without fear is probably not possible, perhaps not even desirable. We spend a great deal of time, for example, teaching our children appropriate fear of things like hot stoves, crossing the street, and threatening strangers. Fear can be a good thing!

The variety of fears we humans experience is wide-ranging. In the fine book *Living Beyond Our Fears: Discovering Life When You're Scared to Death* (Harper

and Row, 1990), Bruce Larson explores several common focuses of our fears: making mistakes, success, the supernatural, missing out, death, hell, the unknown and, interestingly, fear itself. You have likely experienced some of these fears yourself. Without a doubt, fear has an amazing variety of opportunities to enter and even dominate our lives.

How can we deal with fear when it strikes? There are ways we can manage fear—and even overcome it.

First, we need to admit that we are, indeed, afraid. As with so many feelings, we often try to discount or deny our fear. On the same day that it became apparent that I had cancer, I met for a pre-surgical visit with my physician, a wise Christian woman. After she stated that I would likely need chemotherapy because of my age at the time of diagnosis, I commented "bravely" that I would need to look into getting a good wig. "That would be a good idea," she agreed. With this came the tears, and I said, "I swore I wouldn't cry." With a reassuring hug, my physician said, "Maybe you need to." She was right! Pretending that the anxieties and fears were not real was foolish. Once I admitted my fear, I was able to begin to name it in all of its manifestations.

Sharing our fears with trusted others can be an important next step. As the initial shock of my diagnosis wore off, I was able to turn to others and name the fears that had overwhelmed me. With my husband, I could share my fears that our life together would be cut short, my professional life incomplete, and other things left undone. In conversations with friends and colleagues, I was able to name other dimensions of my fears: fear of the unknown and of the possible effects of the treatment on me. In prayer, I was able to turn to God with complete honesty and share my fears and anxieties.

In this sharing, a pivotal movement took place for me, as I believe it does for many others. **Reaching out to God and other people brought floods of reassurance my way.** Attending a meeting of the Division for Ministry Board the weekend of my diagnosis, I found numerous colleagues who assured me that it was OK to be afraid. Others who had either survived cancer personally or whose spouses had experienced it shared

Fear is a common and very real part of our human existence.



Donna and Larry, two months after her treatments. "You can see my new hair," notes Donna.

their wisdom and faith. Prayers began on my behalf, and a deep strength began to surround me.

I contacted a pastor friend who also is a breast-cancer survivor and asked her to be my "chaplain" through the coming weeks. Her words to me were wonderful: "Remember that there is life on the other side of this—good, abundant life." God spoke to me through all these marvelous people, and God would continue to do so in the months ahead, often in surprising ways.

1 John 4:18 tells us that "perfect love casts out fear." The fears I experienced in my own journey through cancer led me to discover anew the wonders of God's perfect love around me. In the God-given skill and wisdom of my doctors, in the support of a

wonderful husband, and in the company of my beloved congregation I shared my fears and discovered the love that could overcome them. God's love expressed through these people empowered me to act on my fears, seeking and gaining the knowledge and strength needed to endure.

Perhaps my deepest fear all along was that "under fire" I would find my faith too weak, and the things I'd been preaching untrue. What an ungrounded fear! For I found just the opposite: that God's promises were not only sure, they were light and life during dark and fearful days! In Word and Sacrament, in worship and prayer, through the community of the faithful, in the words and gestures of others, perfect love was made clear and cast out—or at least made manageable—my worst fears. **The miracle of fear is that it can lead us to an even deeper trust and reliance on the perfect love of our wonderful God.** LWT

Donna Hacker Smith is pastor of St. James Lutheran Church, Forreston, Ill. She is a frequent contributor to LWT and a retreat leader. She is married to retired Judge Lawrence A. Smith Jr.

The promise is presence

Ellen Fackler Gamrath

Our 2-year-old granddaughter, Abigail, nestled close in my lap as I read her *Where the Wild Things Are*. This classic children's book by Maurice Sendak tells the story of a child confronting, and overcoming, fearful monsters. Abby begged me to reread the part where little Max tames the fearsome creatures. From the safety of my encircling arms, Abby could face her fears.

Fragments of fear exist at any age—ranging from bedtime worries of monsters hiding in the closet to fear of one's own death. The word *fear* taps various emotions in us: stress, awe, anxiety, and terror. Fear can be life-saving when stress motivates us by pouring adrenaline into our bodies and initiating our “fight or flight” response to danger. Fear as awe can enhance our relationship with God and increase our sense of mystery. Yet fear as overwhelming anxiety can rob us of the enjoyment of life. And fear as terror freezes us in a state of horror.

The days of Advent remind us of God's antidote to fear: God's presence. “And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us” (Matthew 1:23b).

Shepherds in Bethlehem's field trembled with fear when angelic music shattered the night's stillness. The angel proclaimed, “Fear not ... for unto you is born this day ... a Savior which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11, King James Version).

So how does our Christian faith help us deal with fear in our lives today? Fear is no stranger in the Bible; we see it raise its head over and over again, from Genesis through Revelation. But the wonderful news is that God breaks into this fear cycle with the promise of God's presence, repeatedly telling us to “fear not.”

*“I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night-time of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.”*

Verse 3 of “The Servant Song” by Richard Gillard,
© 1977, *Scriptures in Song*.

Interestingly, the words *fear not* in the Bible are often followed by the word *for*—a tiny but powerful word that speaks of God's promise to be with us. Psalm 23 powerfully reminds us that "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" (verse 4, King James).

What a promise! A promise, not that life will be easier, but that God will be with us in every situation. Or, as 1 Peter tells us: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you ... God ... will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you" (5:7,10).

I know well this fear cycle and God's comforting "for" from my own life experience. Six years ago, fear invaded my life in the form of breast cancer. With chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, my world shrank to the size of my bedroom. At the same time, my life's depth expanded into a bottomless, fear-filled pit. There was no escape from the imminent reality of death.

Once while praying for relief in sleep's amnesia, I had a remarkable vision that I later recorded in my journal. I wrote:

"I am standing by a windmill near the ocean. There is an immense storm raging, with threatening dark clouds and flashes of lightning. A huge tidal wave crashes toward me as I look out toward the ocean. I see a dike stretching from horizon to horizon. This protective barrier is made up of the people who are praying for me—my faith community. Although still fearful, I know these caring people are my bodyguards and will keep me from being totally overwhelmed by the approaching deadly wave. At the same time, I know Jesus is standing next to me; I am not alone."

I awoke with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude to God. I was, amazingly, filled with great peace and joy. I felt abundantly loved. Fear was not eliminated, but I was able to face my fear with that inestimable promise of God's presence supporting me.

From the security of God's loving, encircling arms, we are empowered to acknowledge and face our fears together. Christ's birth assures us of his presence with us—and strengthens us to live out the promise of God's presence to each other. **LWT**

Ellen Fackler Gamrath and her husband, Jim, live on Mercer Island, Wash. They are members of St. Andrew's, Bellevue.

Ten ways to disarm your fear

Tom McGrath



1. Learn the lesson your fear wants to teach you. “Be not afraid,” said Jesus. Fear can block faith in God. A bout of fear can indicate that we are attached to something—an object, a way of life, an outcome we’ve got our heart set on—more than God. By coming to know our

fears we can ask God’s help in loosening our grip on the transitory and opening our hands to the eternal.

- 2. Feel the fear and do it anyway.** Fear is a great paralyzer. But it doesn’t have to be. Staying in the fear and not taking action is like sitting on a fence; it’s painful and unproductive. If you feel fear, it is wise to pause in order to “stop, look, and listen” before acting. But don’t get caught up in the pause. Consider your best options, say a quick prayer for wisdom, then do what you know needs to be done.
- 3. Take the long view—like from eternity.** Stop a minute and try to remember what you were worrying about last year at this time. Five years ago? Though it’s likely that you had some fear or other making you queasy at those times, odds are you can’t remember what it was! That will be true of today’s worries five years from now. Mark Twain once quipped, “I have known many troubles in my life, most of which never happened.” Why fill our days with possible disaster when we have been offered a

glorious day full of God's promise and love? Keep your eye on the prize—abundant life with God for all eternity—and you'll reduce your worries to a manageable size.

- 4. Remember holy role models.** When I'm feeling afraid, I like to think of the apostles cowering in the boat on the stormy sea or huddled in the upper room moments before Pentecost. It's helpful to know that other terrified people have found a way beyond their fears. I gain courage from reading spiritual biographies of strong people who have stood up for righteousness, risked their security for love or the gospel, or even lost their lives rather than dishonor the truth they'd come to know. On our own, it's hard to summon the strength to overcome our fears. In solidarity with others, we find strength and inspiration.
- 5. Have a good laugh.** You've been in situations where the tension was so thick you could slice it with a Veg-o-matic. Then someone says something humorous, and tension evaporates while hope flows once again. Humor is the human way of thumbing our nose at life's trials. It's our way of saying, "The situation may seem hopeless, but thank God it's not all that serious."
- 6. Hand it over.** Fear uses your imagination to frighten you. You can use your imagination to relieve those fears. I like to visualize an enormous Jesus; he's sitting and waiting for me to approach. One by one, I take my little worries and fears and put them in his big lap. This helps especially as I'm drifting off to sleep and fear keeps nagging. At the end of the day, there's little I can do about these worries, so why not put them in God's lap?
- 7. Borrow someone else's courage.** We all have people in our lives who seem strong and courageous. When faced with a difficult situation, ask, "How would so-and-so handle this?" Think of the people in your life who you know are brave. Surely they feel as much fear as anyone else, but their courage wins out. It won't deplete their supply if you "borrow" some of their courage to get you through rough times.

- 8. Forget yourself and think of someone who needs you right now.** This might be someone in your home, in your neighborhood, or at a great distance. Sitting with fear is like continuing to dig a hole when you're already in over your head. Get out of that hole and back into life by responding to someone else's need. Visit a sick friend; write a letter to a relative far away; make a cake for a coworker's birthday; read a book to a child; write a letter to your senator; volunteer at your church.
- 9. Tap into your passion.** We've all heard stories of mothers who performed feats of amazing strength to save their child from harm. What gave them the ability to do that? Their passionate love for their children. We know we're capable of being both strong and weak, enthusiastic and lethargic, exciting and blasé. The difference is our motivation. What fires you up? Maybe it's the love you have for children or grandchildren. Maybe it's a concern for those suffering illness or injustice. Or maybe you're motivated by the example of others, including Jesus, our Savior. Tap into that passion and discover that fear falls away in the face of it.

- 10. Use spiritual disciplines.** There's an old joke you've probably heard. A man carrying a violin asks a passing New Yorker, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The New Yorker responds, "Practice, practice, practice." There are spiritual practices that can help bolster us against worry, fear, and anxiety. For example, try a reverse fast. Instead of fasting from select foods, go out of your way to experience the taste of the foods you eat. For example, hold a tangerine in your hand. Think of how it grew—as a seed that became a tree that became a branch that became a blossom that became a fruit that sits in your hand. When you taste the fruit, taste the sunshine, the rain, and the providence of God that made the fruit grow. Fear lurks in the future, but you can live in the present moment—and enjoy it!

Other practices that you can use to counter fear include regular prayer, service to others, and turning to the Bible. The Gospel of Mark, in particular, addresses how fear is the primary obstacle to life in Christ. **LWT**

Tom McGrath is executive editor of U.S. Catholic and the author of At Home with Our Faith, a family spirituality newsletter.

No one is left behind

Barbara R. Rossing



The end-times scenario of a recent best-selling novel describes “true Christians” as suddenly raptured, snatched up from the earth by God while others are left behind.

While I disagree with the novel’s notion of rapture, the book’s premise of fear—of being alone or “left behind” in the world.touches a deep nerve, especially in the Christmas season. It is a fear we experience in so many forms: the fear of being left alone when everyone else is surrounded by family

and celebrations; the fear of being left behind in debt, unable to keep up with the consumerism and shopping; the fear of failing to please a loved one; even the fear of feeling spiritually alone in the midst of the season, longing to feel God’s living presence in our lives. This year, the millennium countdown and fears of “Y2K” chaos may trigger additional anxieties.

The Christmas promise that God comes to earth to dwell with us is an antidote to these anxieties.

In the book of Revelation, as in the prologue to the Gospel of John, God is not one who snatches us up from the earth, leaving some behind, but one who comes to earth to dwell in our midst. Both the Gospel of John and Revelation use the Greek word *skenoo* to emphasize God’s “dwelling” or “tenting” with us on earth. John proclaims that God’s word has become flesh and “lived among us” (John 1:14). In Revelation, God’s home or “dwelling” is on earth, in a wondrous city that descends from heaven to earth (Revelation 21:2-3). Water of life from the throne of God and Christ flows for everyone, and a spacious fruit-bearing tree of life provides food and healing for the nations (22:1-3). This vision of our future with God on earth is very different from the threats and predictions

that some will be "left behind."

As we greet the new millennium, I am convinced that Revelation's vision of God's wondrous "dwelling" on earth is one of the most hope-filled visions of our future in all of the Bible. It is also a profoundly ecological vision. It reminds us how much God loves the earth.

What is the future of the earth, our home and God's? Among all the fears and anxieties of this season, environmental destruction is one fear for the future that we dare not shake off. Never have we seen so many signals from the earth that ecological deterioration is underway. Forests are being destroyed, species are becoming extinct, and atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are rising. Instead of fearing that we will be left behind by God on earth, perhaps we should rather fear destroying the very earth God loves—God's home.

The wondrous picture of God's dwelling with us in Revelation 21—22 can be an invitation to us to come home to God's river of life flowing through our world. The biblical water of life and tree of life are not just spiritual waters, theological trees. They speak also to the real rivers and

forests of our world. All the waters are connected; all the rivers flow out from the throne of God and the lamb. We need all the rivers for life on this planet, our fragile and beautiful home.

One of my favorite Bible verses is Psalm 46:4: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." Is there a way we can hear this proclamation anew, for the ecological health of our cities and our earth?

Cherishing the rivers and forests of God's earth will require some tough changes in our lifestyle. A new ELCA document on economic life, "Toward a Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," calls for far-reaching modifications in our economy and way of life in order to sustain the earth and our communities. Our church can lead us as we address ecological concerns with hope.

"Emmanuel," the message of Christmas, means that "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). In Jesus, God comes to dwell with us on earth. This is a wondrous, ecological promise. It's a promise we can trust in the midst of all fears and anxieties. As we begin the new millennium, there need be no anxiety. No one is left behind. **LWT**



Barbara R. Rossing teaches New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and chairs the board of Lutheran Peace Fellowship.

What am I afraid of?

Readers reflect on fear and faith in their lives.



THE WINDMILL'S MESSAGE

*Dad, you didn't tell me
What the silent signal meant,
I knew not the fear within you
Or the fragile health of Mom;
A life within her forming
Could threaten to be lost,
So an open, turning windmill
Would bring you dashing home.*

*The day was dry and
windy,
A fresh cold drink would taste
so good;
I lift the wooden handle,
I turn the windmill on.
It spins and whirs and sings
In its own mysterious way,
A sentinel of life and hope
On a Dakota country hill.*

*Dad sees the windmill turning,
His heart leaps to his throat!
The team unhitched,
He rides one horse, the other by
his side.
Dick and Dolly gallop home
Unaware of why the rush,
Just faithful to a kind and loving
master
Who has always been their friend.*

*Why is Dad hurrying home?
What happened in the field?
"Is Mom OK?"
"Who turned the windmill on?"
"I did, I turned the windmill on.
I'm sorry. I didn't know
The message it relayed,
The fear it would bring."*

*No punishment was given,
Just a silent prayer of thanks
That Mom was well
And a daughter was forgiven.
As the wind so turns the windmill,
So the Spirit guides our lives;
As it flows and blows and whispers,
Gently leading followers home.*

*Darlene (Stadsklev) Cox
Albuquerque, N.M.*

IN THE LOVING ARMS OF GOD

As I write this, I am extremely frightened! I am also pretty cool and calm. Do I sound mixed up? Yes, I certainly am.

About a month ago, I learned that my life may be shortened considerably. You see, I was in a very serious, near fatal auto accident in March 1976. Yes, that was a long time ago. I am the first to tell everyone how blessed I was to survive multiple injuries, including four fractured cervical vertebrae. I rise every morning and thank God for giving me the gift of walking, talking, and experiencing joy. So, what's the big deal, you may wonder.

Numerous medical tests and a second opinion has confirmed that my very difficult breathing is due to paralysis of the diaphragm. This will progressively get worse; even now my phrenic nerve is only working at 35 percent.

Enough on that! I feel that I can deal with what is in store for me with God's help. But I am very frightened for my children and husband as they watch me become dependent. I have always been the caregiver. I pray their Christian backgrounds will enable them to seek comfort in the loving arms of our Lord.

I am cool and calm because our Lord has blessed me with a very fulfilled life, and because of his grace I will go to heaven. What a wonderful life to look forward to!

*Roberta Santangelo
St. Louis, Mo.*

IN GIVING WE ARE HEALED

I got married very young. My husband, Bill, and I practically grew up together. We were married 42 years when he passed away. I was so afraid of being alone. How could I possibly go on? I would cry out to God, "I can't do this, I can't do this."

That was nine years ago. I never left God, and I know God never left me. I would take two steps forward and one step back.

My church family has been a great comfort to me. My faith is growing every day. I have learned to reach out beyond myself to others. It's in giving that I am healed. With God's help, I am a whole person again. I am no longer lonely. I am not afraid.

One of my favorite hymns reminds me that just as God watches over the sparrow, God also watches me, and gives me courage to live the life I'm called to live.

*Rosemarie Hines
Clinton, Wash.*

HELP FROM PSALM 121

I lay on the gurney staring at the ceiling. I was next in line for the operating room, and as I lay there cold and alone, fear began to creep in. What had been thought to be a benign lump in my breast was found to be malignant after a lumpectomy. The area now had to be excised three to five centimeters more, with radiation to follow.

The words of my "second opinion" doctor were ringing in my ears. She

thought I should have the whole breast removed along with the lymph nodes. My physician felt that wasn't necessary and I believed her. Had I made the right decision?

The anesthesiologist arrived to give me a local. Fear began to take a foothold now as I realized I'd be conscious throughout the procedure. I scolded myself for these feelings. I thought of other things that had scared me in the past and remembered what had calmed my fears. Verses from Psalm 121 flashed through my mind. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord" (Revised Standard Version).

As they had in the past, these verses spoke to my fear. As I repeated them, fear diminished and God's peace replaced it. I no longer felt alone. God would be with me in the operating room and would keep me through the radiation ahead. The Lord who made heaven and earth was indeed my source of help and strength. **LWT**

*Jeanne Philbrick
Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.*

What faith lesson has a child taught you? Send your Reader Call essay (350 words or less) on "A child-like faith" to **LWT** Reader Call, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. Deadline: December 15, 1999.

A word fitly recalled

Michael L. Cobbler

I memorize Bible verses. I grew up in a family and faith community that believed the Bible is a "word to be studied and trusted, not a book to be displayed and dusted."

My early awareness of memorizing Scripture started at the dinner table. It was the practice in our family, as in many African American families, for each member to recite a verse from a book of the Bible before eating. In our case, six family members—and often one or two guests—would have to recite different verses before we could eat. John 11:35 was often the first one recited, often followed by Psalm 23:1. After that it was every-verse-reciter-for-herself-or-himself. One of the adults would have the "authorized" King James Version on hand—just to make sure the verse wasn't misquoted or fabricated. Scripture recollection became a matter of survival—if I wanted to eat, I needed to know Bible verses by heart, and I had to know more than just a few.

Another strong influence came from my Sunday school teachers at First Church of Christ, Scientist in Brooklyn, New York. The system of scripture study in Christian Science congregations, even to this day,

involves daily study of scripture passages around a topic for that week. I figured if I could retain some thoughts from the Bible and carry them with me, those thoughts would keep me in good stead in the future. And, in surprising and unusual ways, that has been true.

It was summer 1968, and racial tensions were high in Brooklyn and the nation. My home congregation, Holy Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran, hired White college students to work with us in the congregation's summer day-camp program. These students also lived in a neighborhood apartment. One night an incident with the police spread into the neighborhood and a mob formed. Some troublemakers, knowing that White students lived in this apartment, called out, "White people live there—let's get them!" All of the camp staff were gathered at the apartment, knowing there might be some trouble that night, but we figured we had enough friends in the neighborhood to ensure our safety. A rock coming through the living room window changed all that. I initially said to myself, "This is really something else—I'm gonna get done in by a race riot in my own neighborhood!"

But then I thought, "Wait a minute! We're all here for the right reasons, and if the apartment can't protect us, maybe God will." Instead of being quiet, we started to sing, beginning with "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." All through that time, I said Psalm 46:7 over and over—"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." We were "under siege" for about two hours. The apartment sustained a fair amount of damage, but no one was hurt.

It has been my regular practice to say a sentence prayer or Bible verse just before an outreach visit. On one particular day when I was starting with "cold calls" in the neighborhood, I decided to say Proverbs 25:11—"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver"—before each call.

These visits were in a low-income housing project. On the first visit, a young woman holding a child answered the door. There were four other young children close by. I explained I was the new pastor of the church nearby and was visiting my neighbors. While she was telling me about herself the phone rang five times, the children asked for something four times, and a neighbor dropped by to borrow something—all in the space of six minutes.

When she sat down to talk, I said, "It seems like you seldom have a moment to yourself." Her eyes opened wide and she said, "A moment to myself—never, ever! Let me tell you what it's like never to have a moment for yourself!" Then she talked nonstop for 10 minutes. Eventually that woman became a leader in setting up a community day-care center.

Recalling Scripture is an enriching exercise—and you probably know more Scripture by heart than you think. Most of our passages in worship are adapted from Scripture (see the benediction from Numbers 6:24-26). Ten of my favorite examples to recall by memory are listed below. As you read them, think about the passages you want to move from page to memory. Blessings as you take Scripture to head and to heart! **LWT**

Michael L. Cobbler is an ELCA pastor and director of development and public relations for the Lutheran Deaconess Association (Valparaiso, Ind.).

TEN VERSES “LEARNED BY HEART”

- 1. Genesis 50:20**—“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ...”
- 2. Proverbs 25:11**—“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”
- 3. Matthew 5:1-12**—The Beatitudes.
- 4. Isaiah 40:1-2**—“Comfort, O comfort my people ...”
- 5. Luke 2:29-32**—“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word ...”
- 6. John 3:16-17**—“For God so loved the world that ...”
- 7. Psalm 89:1-2**—“I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD ...”
- 8. Psalm 46:7**—“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”
- 9. Romans 12:9**—“Let love be genuine ...”
- 10. Hebrews 11:1**—“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

A taste of the season

JOY TO THE WORLD *

In Advent we hear voices crying in the wilderness. The wilderness isn't supposed to have voices. That's what makes it "wilderness." Howling jackals, or the incessant moaning of the wind? Yes. But not voices.

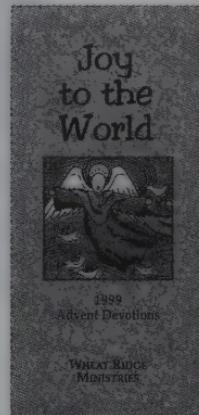
Our English word *wilderness* means "place of wild things." The Bible's Greek word means "place of abandonment." The still more ancient Hebrew word means "somewhere beyond words."

Most of us know that place beyond words, and the farther in we go, the greater our distance from home. Ironically, words like layoff, downsizing, inoperable, terminal, divorce, accident, and suicide often banish us to the place that words can't describe. And then we walk a road we can't name, in a place beyond description, without a single word of explanation.

Our faith, and the story it clings to, provides words for our frequent treks through the wilderness. One word tells us we're never alone out here. "My God, my God, why?" Yes, even he stumbled into the wordless abyss.

Ultimately, there is no answer to that question, no reason why. There is only that word calling from somewhere up ahead (or is it from behind?): "Come hooooooome! You are mine, dear child! Your place is here!"

The road home is on most maps. The blue highways, the red ones, even the gray, dotted lines between the tiny burgs—they're all roads home just as surely as they lead farther and deeper into the wilderness. All depends on the voice that calls you, the hand of the creator that will never let go of you no matter how lost you get.



There are many excellent resources available to help us prepare our hearts for the coming of Immanuel, God with us, during Advent. Excerpts from two such devotionals, both new this year, are offered here.—Ed.

* *Joy to the World* is the 1999 devotional booklet from Wheat Ridge Ministries, written by Frederick A. Niedner Jr. Copyright © 1999, Wheat Ridge Ministries. Used with permission. To order call 800-762-6748; 50 cents each, plus shipping and handling.



The road home leads up the aisle to the altar where we stop for a meal. And it leads straight back out again to the places where we hurl words into the wordlessness: "Come home! You belong to us!"

Frederick A. Niedner Jr.

MANGER IN THE MOUNTAINS *

Joseph was a carpenter. Do you suppose Mary could have been one, too? Maybe if she had been a young Aymara (eye-MA-ra) Indian woman living above La Paz, she would have met another John the Baptist who could have trained her to be just that.

He had the look of a John the Baptist, tall and long-armed with a full gray beard and flying hair. A German man, he had been sent to Bolivia as a missionary long enough ago to have become more at home in Bolivia than in his homeland. He talked in a lickety-split manner to dramatize what he was saying.

Burkhard Sievers (SEE-verz), missionary and pastor, had seen what was happening to women and

their children when there was no work available. So he started a group called Yatiyawi (yah-tee-YAH-wee), designing and building furniture out of pine and bamboo. He began training unemployed women from the area, setting up a carpenter's school. At the same time, he started building a factory, purchasing the machines and hand tools needed. Within not so many years, the women were being recognized as some of the finest carpenters in the country, and their furniture was marketed as far away as Germany and the United States. Soon he was not the only one speaking a word of hope.

As we walked through, we saw the women—and an occasional man—hard at work, their long black braids tied together behind them so they wouldn't drop into the blade of a table saw. These carpenter women straightened what once were crooked paths. They dared to learn, and point people to the manger, to a promise and hope. **LWT**

James Arne Nestingen

* *Manger in the Mountains*, an Advent devotional book for families, is also available in Spanish as *Un Pesebre en las Montañas*. Copyright © 1999, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. Used with permission. To order, call Augsburg Fortress at 800-328-4648; \$5.99 each, plus shipping and handling. Contact Lutheran World Relief for a free *Manger in the Mountains* Advent calendar.

Birthing Jesus

Cindy Von Oehsen

I birthed my first son in October a few years back, on a robust, warm, golden-red day. We brought Sten home soon after, and I set my alarm clock as I went to bed so I would awaken two hours later to feed him. And then, of course, I never slept . . . because, of course, he never slept. Day was night and night was day for our new little family member, one of those things no one tells you about before the birthing.

We started down this nighttime path together, and things gradually got better so that by December he was waking only once or twice a night. I held him and we rocked and he ate. And though I most always arose begrudgingly, as we rocked I knew in my heart that these were moments to savor, moments meant only for my son and me, and for all my thoughts and hopes and dreams surrounding our new experience as mother and son.

Soon Advent was upon us, and my midnight-feeding thoughts turned to Mary, and the birthing of her first son. And suddenly I realized that my understanding of the Christmas story had been turned on its head. Since I've become a mother, the story of the birth of Jesus touches a new and deep place within me, helping me understand what Mary experienced so long ago.

All the years that I'd heard the Christmas story read from the Bible, I never imagined birthing screams or cries in the background. And every time I saw a Christmas program, the hay was clean and the night was beautiful. Mary, sweet and mild, would go into the barn with Joseph and moments later would be seen swaddling a radiant Jesus.

I think that part of the story, and part of God's message to us, is missing in our pristine imaginings of Christ's birth. I don't believe that God made it easy on Mary. Why would God choose to deliver God's Son through a human only to alter the process and make it easier? In this very act of sending God to us through Mary, the extremely challenging processes of pregnancy and birth were sanctified





*The author
and new baby,
Evan.*

and made holy. The blood, the pain, the pushing, the sweat, and the fear and elation allow mortal and godly to mingle; a new soul is birthed through mortal flesh. Mary, like the mothers who came before and after her, took part in God's divine act of giving life.

Mary was obviously a woman with great strength of will and character, but she had never given birth before. Who helped her breathe through the pain of her contractions? Did anyone tell her when to push or when to rest? Did Joseph hold her hands and wipe her brow? Was she scared? Were angels there telling her to "fear not"? How long did the process take? What was her first glimpse of Jesus like? Did she moan and cry and sing "Alleluia" all at once? I bet so.

**Watch for
more
"Mothering
Seasons"—
columns
reflecting on
parenting and
faith—in
upcoming
issues of
Lutheran
Woman Today.**

All these details are important to me because I now understand what is in them. As I labored with our son, God helped me understand that I could rise to the challenge. The miracle was not easy to achieve—in many ways it was the hardest thing I've ever done. But through the

pain I discovered my ability to endure. As I pushed I discovered my strength. And as I glimpsed my son's precious little body for the first time I wept at how deeply I can love. Sometimes God doesn't just hand us miracles—we must participate, as Mary learned.

I plan to imagine Mary birthing Jesus—bodily and soulfully participating in the miracle—as part of my Advent devotions, and most likely, as part of future midnight-feeding ruminations. God's choice to send Jesus as a baby, with flesh and blood, was a gift to me as a mother. That single choice tells me how important we are as mothers, how truly we are in partnership with God as we raise our children.

This Advent season I thank God for Mary's life and strength, and for Jesus' miraculous pathway into this world. **LWT**

Since writing this column, Cindy Von Oehsen gave birth to her second son, Evan. Cindy, her husband, Stephen, and sons Sten and Evan live in Oak Park, Ill., where they are members of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

IdeaNet

December 1999 • Vol. 3, Number 4

For Mission Together

Be-there Events

Twenty-nine years ago, when my mother came to meet our brand-new daughter, Ilse, she brought a gift from the St. Luke Women—Alvah Wald's rice pudding. "They knew Ilse made you miss the Advent Festival," she said, "so they sent along a taste of it."

The festival was more than krumkake and Inga and Margrete wearing Norwegian dresses. It was the women's gift to the congregation, with special music, a guest speaker, and readings from Isaiah. It always helped us to center the season on Jesus before the holidays got frenzied.

The first questions to ask for "be-there events" are, "How will this event further our mission? How does it proclaim the gospel of Christ?" Unless an event is solidly grounded in your purpose, it can sidetrack the group's energies. Working together on a popular event is fun, but fun and fellowship are by-products of such events, not the reasons for them.

The idea for a new event may come from the dreams and visions of one person, but don't let all the work land on the shoulders of only a few people. Broaden the base of workers by asking chairpersons to recruit their own

committees. Challenge yourselves to include new women each year. Hold a follow-up meeting to talk about what went well, what could have been better, and what areas need new ideas and new energies. Then be on the lookout throughout the year for people to help in these areas.

Finally, don't be afraid to change or even end a tradition that has become more a burden than a joy. Remember, it is not your mission to preserve an event; rather, events must serve your mission.

The St. Luke Advent Festival was combined with the senior choir concert several years ago. Then both were combined with the Sunday school program. Alvah and Margrete and Mom are in heaven. Inga moved back to Norway. Maybe someday the Advent Festival will end.

But Jesus still lives. New traditions to share the gospel arise. This year for Rally Day we had a bluegrass service. Ilse was one of the singers.

Inez M. Schwarzkopf is associate vice president for marketing with the ELCA Mission Investment Fund. She was director for community and organizational development for Women of the ELCA in 1988.

PostCard Ideas

Grandmother-Mother-Daughter banquet

For five years our unit has held a grandmother-mother-daughter banquet. What started as a small gathering of 60 women has doubled in attendance.

Guests wear interesting hats and bring their favorite dolls. A small committee prepares the meal, and for two years, the men of the church have served the meal. Preparing the food ourselves helps us keep the cost of the tickets low.

We invite interesting speakers and have a community musical group entertain us. The women and children tell about their dolls, and we give prizes for the best hats, the woman who has been a mother the longest, the woman who has brought the most guests, the youngest guest, and so on.

The banquet is held the second Tuesday in February, and the hall and tables are decorated with a Valentine theme. Even downpours and the rare snow-storm have not dampened the enthusiasm of all participating.

Illy Wood
Messiah Lutheran
Knoxville, Tenn.

Recycling good ideas

We used two ideas from the March 1999 *IdeaNet* for our annual mother-daughter gathering. We renamed the event "Daughters of All Ages," as

suggested by Delores Justman, and had a few attend for the first time (they are daughters but not mothers).

We also used Gail Wolf's idea of a "Grandma's Attic." In keeping with our old-fashioned theme, we used pastel tablecloths and had colorful gingham sachets at each place, plus pastel mints in one-ounce plastic glasses. We served gingerbread and whipped cream. We had slates for the girls to play with while the antique dealer was appraising one favorite antique from each daughter present.

Thanks to the two women for passing on these great ideas!

Jan Baldwin
St. John Lutheran
Findlay, Ohio

Teddy bears' picnic

Our mother-daughter event this year was called Teddy Bears' Picnic. We collected new teddy bears and were able to donate 44 bears to the local fire department for its Buddy Bear program. The medics give the bears to small children when they have to be transported by ambulance.

Mitzi Iverson
First Lutheran
St. Helens, Ore.

Taters and treasures

This year the Ruth Circle had responsibility for the mother-daughter event held on the Saturday before Mother's Day. We

changed the name to mother-child banquet so that no one would be excluded.

Knowing how all of us treasure our antiques, we had an antique appraiser come. We served baked potatoes with many toppings for our Taters and Treasures event. It was a huge success!

We also sold packs of flowers to raise money for our circle (a few buds with our spuds).

Lynn E. Anderson

Trinity Lutheran

West Bend, Wis.

Father-Daughter event

Following our father-daughter banquet this year, we all moved to the narthex to play the "Father-Daughter Game," a variation on the "Newlywed Game."

Names of the father-daughter pairs were placed in one of three baskets according to the daughter's age: 8-10, 11-14, and 15 and up. One round was played with each age group.

One dad and his daughter served as our master of ceremonies. They drew the names of four pairs of contestants from the baskets. The dads stood behind one long table, and the daughters behind another. Each person had an erasable board.

Each group was given five questions, each worth a different number of points, depending on the difficulty. The questions were asked of everyone at the same time, and the contestants wrote their answers on their boards. One by one, we would ask each father-daughter team for its answers, and

check to see if the answers matched. If the answers matched, the pair would receive the specified number of points. The winning pairs received a candy bar; the consolation prizes were small mints.

A father-daughter duet performed before the game, and a father-daughter show choir (20 strong) sang "Side by Side" for the finale. A good time was had by all.

Sue Raether

Bethany Lutheran

Rice Lake, Wis.

Cookie walk

We have a cookie walk every year before Christmas, and yes, people line up to buy our cookies! All the profit goes to the needy and to worthwhile organizations.

Delores Kruger

Trinity Lutheran

Sleepy Eye, Minn.

Uses for old cards

I recycle old cards by punching holes around the edges of a pretty scene and crocheting a border with cotton thread. Or I trim the cards with craft scissors to give a decorative edge and then weave a narrow satin ribbon through the punched

Send all
**Postcard
Ideas**
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Email: IdeaNet@elca.org

holes. These make a nice decoration for a tray for shut-ins.

Martha Schroeder
St. Paul Lutheran
Gilead, Neb.

Family New Year's Eve celebration

For several years the evangelism team of First Lutheran Church has hosted a Family New Year's Eve Fun Night. A potluck supper is served in the church basement beginning at 6:00, followed by time for board games. At one table the youngsters play Candy Land,

Chutes and Ladders, and Uncle Wiggly. The grownups are challenged by a game of Bible trivia at their own table. The evening ends at 9:00, so families have time together without having to spend a fortune on a babysitter for an entire evening. (One year, however, we stayed at the church until nearly 11:00—there's no safer place on New Year's Eve!)

Sylvia Leiseth
First Lutheran
Watford City, N.D.

Share
your ideas!

Coming Up in IdeaNet

May 2000

Working with Public Schools

How has your group partnered with public schools to make a difference?

(Due January 3, 2000)

June 2000

Sacristy and Kitchen Duties

Cleaning the church kitchen, providing hospitality at weddings and funerals, serving on the altar guild—send in your tips

for sharing the labor and helping these ministries work well.

(Due February 1, 2000)

July/August 2000

Living God's Justice

How is your circle, unit, or synodical women's organization living out the triennium theme? Share ideas for justice-related programs, events, retreats, and litanies.

(Due March 1, 2000)

Note: Good ideas on any topic are welcome at any time.

IdeaNet



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And they laughed

Terence E. Fretheim

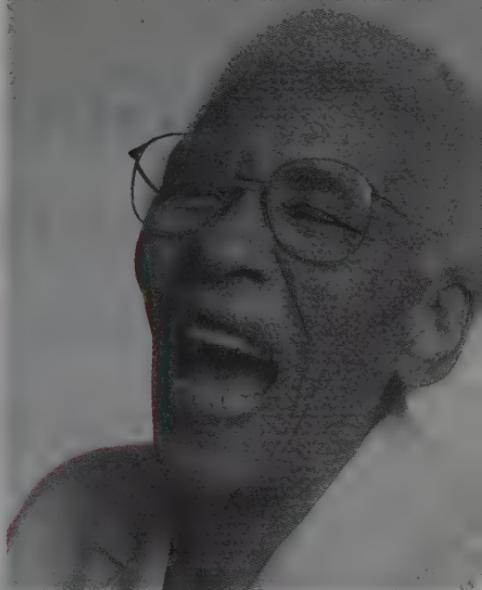
Laughter can mean many things. We can laugh at a joke, or laugh something off, or laugh at ourselves, or have the last laugh. Laughter may be a snicker, a chuckle, a giggle, a hoot, a shriek, or even a sneer. Laughter can be a sign of joy or ridicule or even sadness.

To know what a person's laughter means, you almost have to "be there." Even then we may leave an encounter with someone wondering how to interpret her laugh.

Laughter is a theme in the story of Sarah and Abraham. The name of their son, Isaac, comes from the Hebrew word for "laughter." What might it mean to go through the rest of your life with a name that means "laughter"?

It seems clear from Genesis 21:6 that Sarah gives her son the name Isaac because she is overjoyed and knows that others will be joyful with her. Given her age, a child was totally unexpected—a true miracle. The name Isaac would be a constant reminder of the joy at his birth.

Yet the name Isaac would also be a reminder of another kind of laughter in this story. When God told Abraham that he would have a son by Sarah, he "fell on his face and laughed" (Genesis 17:17). Given their ages, Abraham could not believe what he heard, and he



laughed. It seems to be the laugh of incredulity; the news didn't make sense to him.

Similarly, when Sarah overheard God and Abraham talking about her being the mother of a son, she "laughed to herself" (Genesis 18:12-15), probably for the same reason that Abraham laughed. When God asks Abraham about Sarah's laughter, she denies it out of fear. Without passing judgment on her (!), God makes it clear that she did, in fact, laugh. Indeed, God knows that both Abraham and Sarah responded with laughter.

Isaac is a reminder of two different responses to God's promise: incredulity and joy. Chances are that God's Word has generated both kinds of laughter in you at one time or another. May your laughter increasingly take the form of joy. **LWT**

Terence E. Fretheim is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. He is the author of *In God's Image*, the Bible study on *Genesis* in LWT (see page 26).

In God's Image

A Study of Genesis

Terence E. Fretheim



SESSION 4

God's unconditional promises

STUDY TEXTS

Genesis 12—15; 15:1-21; 17:1—18:15

MEMORY VERSE

And he [Abraham] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

OVERVIEW

The story of Sarah and Abraham is centered on the promises God gives to them, and their responses. God repeats the promises in various forms over the course of their journey (see 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:3-8, 15-18; 18:8-15). Abraham and Sarah have several responses, including faith (15:6) and laughter (17:17; 18:12).

Abraham and Sarah have different names at the beginning of this story. Until chapter 17, they are called Abram and Sarai. You will see both sets of names in this session depending on the names used in the texts being studied.

OPENING

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is

leading us and your love supporting us. Amen. (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 153, adapted)

PROMISES, PROMISES

Promises shape our lives more than we realize. Some of your more memorable moments have certainly been marked by promises made and promises kept (or not kept). We make promises to a spouse in marriage or to family members about household rules. As baptismal sponsors and parents we make promises at baptism, and we even make promises to a bank or mortgage company. As we study these texts, we can think of promises we make to God and promises God makes to us.

1. Think of a major promise you have made in your life. In what ways have you broken the promise? How have you kept it?

Humans are better at making promises than keeping them. Pundits accuse politicians of poor promise-keeping. You have probably run into a company that didn't stand by its product, and sometimes the promises made in marriage are broken. We have a cynical response to commitments made these days: "promises, promises."

Sometimes we make or hear promises that have conditions attached: I will keep the promise, if—if you do this or that. With these promises, we tend to keep close tabs on what happens, watching to make sure the conditions are met.

There are also promises that have no conditions. These we make with great seriousness. Wedding vows don't usually require that the spouse earn a certain income for the promise to be kept (at least we do not do this consciously). We don't promise to our children that we'll be there for them only if they get straight "A's. We recognize how important these kinds of promises are for daily life. It is important to remember in reading these texts that God is one who keeps promises, come what may. God is faithful! And God's love for you is unconditional. No strings attached!

2. Read Genesis 11:27—12:6. According to 12:1-3, what will happen to Abram because God has chosen him? For what purposes has God chosen you (see John 15:16-17)? Name a time when, looking back, you now see that God chose you for a specific purpose.

We do not know why God chose Abram rather than another person, but this choice was part of a divine strategy. God had to start somewhere to begin to carry out the redemption of the world.

God's intention for Abram and his family is stated in 12:2-3: to "be a blessing" to others, in fact to "all the families of the earth." And in order for Abram to be a channel of blessing for others, he and his family were to be blessed.

Genesis 12:1-3 and 12:7 are words of God to Abram. There is an emphasis on the subject of most of the verbs ("I"). These are promises of God to Abram ("you"). The future of Abram and his family will be decisively shaped by God's promises.

Students of the Bible usually consider Genesis 12:1-3 to provide the key to the rest of Genesis and even the rest of the Bible. This call of God creates Abram's faith and generates responses from him (beginning already in 12:4) that eventually result in the formation of an entire people: Israel.

Abram responds positively even though he has not been told who is speaking to him! He apparently infers that such a word could come only from God. He ventures forth with less than absolute certainty, trusting that he was dealing with God (see Hebrews 11:8).

God directs Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house (note the increasing levels of intimacy). God's promises will entail a new community for Abram and a new name. But God leaves the destination unnamed (see the prayer for this session). Given Abram's itinerary (12:5), at least his first destination—Canaan—is shortly made clear.

It is remarkable how much of what God says is general and open-ended. Yet Abram asks no questions (he will later, in chapters 15 and 18) and engages in no careful calculation

about the pros and cons of the move. Note, however, that family decisions had already been made regarding a move to the land of Canaan (see 11:31). Abram simply trusts that God will find a way into the future that is in the best interests of his family.

The word *bless* is repeated. It refers to goodness and well-being in every sphere of life—spiritual, physical, and material. The promises of nation and name assume that Abram will have many descendants.

Curse is the opposite of blessing. Those who curse Abram and his family, and disdain the purposes of God that they embody, will continue to live in the effects of their sins.

GOD MAKES PROMISES

3. Read 15:1-6. God responds to Abram's questions with promises. Is this the first time Abram has demonstrated faith in God? (Check out 12:1-4 and Hebrews 11:8.)

"Abram believed," that is, he trusted in the promises God had just spoken (15:5), though he could not prove that they were true. God doesn't present arguments to which Abram agrees, nor does God twist his arm. God makes promises and assures Abram that they will be kept. This promise creates Abram's faith. As Hebrews 11:1 puts it, faith is the "conviction of things not seen."

When God "reckoned it to him as righteousness," God, in effect, made a public announcement. God declared that Abram is righteous—he is in a right relationship with God. Christians are declared righteous at baptism.

This verse is important for the apostle Paul (see Galatians 3:6-9; Romans 4:9-25). His basic point is that "those who believe are the descendants of Abraham," quite apart from any law that they might obey (Galatians 3:7). In this respect, Abraham is the father of us all. Obedience follows from faith; it doesn't lead us to it or create it.

4. What questions does Abram ask in Genesis 15:2-3 and 15:8? What kind of information is he looking for?

Abram's questions do not indicate disbelief or a weak faith. Rather, he presses God to clarify the situation. He wants to understand what God is up to in his life. God doesn't ridicule Abram's questions or scold him. God assures him that he will have children (15:4-5), and God makes a covenant (15:9-21). Abram understands that his God is the kind of God who is open to questions. Abram understands that he need not be afraid of addressing questions to God (as he also does in 18:22-25).

Faith does not suppress questions. As is also often true for our faith, Abram's faith is not an easy and simple resignation, with no questions allowed to intrude. It is entirely natural for people of faith to continue to struggle with the meaning of our relationship to God, to ask questions, and to grow.

When God relates to people, God invites them into genuine conversation. In fact, prayer is God's gift to us for the sake of interaction between God and ourselves. God so enters into relationships that God is not the only one who has something important to say. God takes what we have to say with great seriousness. What we have to say counts with God. God does not demand self-effacing believers. Questioning, passion, and argument, even challenge to God, are signs of health in the relationship with God (as they are in any good relationship).

THE PROMISE OF A CHILD

5. Read Genesis 17:15-19. About whom does God make this promise, and how does Abraham respond?

Earlier, in Genesis 16, Sarai suggested that Abram have a child by Hagar (16:2). Ishmael, son of Hagar and Abram, was even considered the child God had promised. In 17:15-19, the promise for the first time includes Sarai/Sarah.

The language of God's promise to Sarah is very similar to that given Abraham (see 17:4-6). Though God does not speak this promise to Sarah directly, but to Abraham, God does not place Sarah under the authority of Abraham. This is significant. Sarah does not find her importance for the community of faith or for the future only through Abraham. She is a full and genuine participant in the covenant that God makes.

Abraham falls on his face in laughter. How could he and Sarah become parents at their age? When Abraham expresses a desire that Ishmael be the promised son, God simply rejects the idea and repeats that Sarah will be the mother of a son, Isaac.

6. Read Genesis 18:9-15. What is the promise, and how does Sarah respond? Note God's reaction in 18:14.

It appears that Abraham had not told Sarah about the earlier promise (17:19). This time around, he simply remains silent. Sarah can't believe it either, given her age. At least she didn't fall on her face! It is also not fully clear in these verses when Sarah and Abraham realize that it is God who is speaking to them.

When God asks why Sarah laughed, his question is not an accusation but a continuation of the conversation about the child to be born. This time Sarah either lies about it or withdraws her laughter, perhaps because she finally realizes God is speaking. God knows the truth, however. Both Sarah and Abraham have the same response to the promise.

People of faith often have difficulty believing some of God's promises. They sound too good to be true! Or we may not understand their benefit to us. As with Sarah and Abraham, God does not insist on perfection in our responses to the promises. For that graciousness of God we can be grateful!

7. Reflect on the power of God's promises to you in your baptism (see box below). How might your life have been different if God had not chosen you and you had not heard and seen God in your life?

BAPTISMAL PROMISES

"In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the church, which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God. (Opening address, Service of Holy Baptism, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 121.)

LOOKING AHEAD

In the next session we will look at the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, a great ecological catastrophe. Prepare by reading Genesis 18: 16—19:38 and learning Genesis 18:19a. 

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Requiem of hope

Ellen Fackler Gamrath

Last October, before our trip to Greece and Turkey, another important journey needed to be made. My husband, Jim, and I headed from Seattle to the Olympic Peninsula for a visit with my cousin Lois and her husband, Milt. Cancer therapy began for Lois early in 1998. By the time the disease was discovered, the cancer had metastasized and established beachheads in various parts of her body. Lois was battling for her life on many fronts as she began her fourth round of chemotherapy.

Lois and I shared more than 60 years of family history. We sat around her kitchen table visiting. Her most recent regime of chemotherapy required continuous infusion of chemicals through a cumbersome cylinder worn around her neck, but it was not visible. She wore a fashionable, loose denim shirt that concealed the bulky contraption. Intent on enjoying life to the fullest, she did not want the primary focus to be on her illness.

Lois began outlining her next project. "I have more energy since I started the infusions. I've even started composing our Christmas letter now, in case I don't feel like it later on."

Each year for more than 40 years, Lois has sent out a Christmas letter lovingly written in verse. Even when the words are stretched to "fit," the verses radiate her faith and hope. I told Lois that I love the way her Christmas letters always reflect both the blessings and the trials in her life, and how her thankfulness and trust in God shine through. I wondered out loud, "What will you put in this year's letter?"

Lois thought a moment and responded, "It will need to have hope in it, hope for God's promise of healing rather than sureness of cure. The shock of discovering I had cancer, and the pain and the time devoted to treatment will be difficult to express in a way that lets the hope shine through. But our life has not been all doom



Ellen (right) and her cousin Lois Soderquist Nesse.

*I thought
of all the
verses
that Lois
composed
Christmas
after
Christmas.*

and gloom. We have much to be grateful for ... we've had 'ministering angels.' I don't want to ignore the other part, though. My disappointment in my lack of response to treatment, the stomach pain, and weight loss are realities, too. How will I rhyme those? How can I express that for me Christ makes the unbearable bearable?"

We reminisced for several hours. As we rose to leave, Lois always the consummate craft person, insisted that I see the "disco ball" she was making—a plastic-foam core with miniature Christmas lights and strips of netting skewered in with hair pins. She had the frothy ball half completed. Voicing disappointment, she explained, "I thought I'd have this done to give to you but I fell asleep and didn't get it finished." I assured her, "Lois, as pretty and fluffy as it is, I'll be very unhappy if you push yourself to complete the project."

As we hugged good-bye, I could feel the ominous cylinder beneath her clothing. That reality triggered tears. "We'll be back in a couple of weeks. We'll come over and tell you about our experiences in the places St. Paul journeyed. I promise."

It was a promise I couldn't keep. The message was waiting on our answering machine when we returned from our trip. We heard Milt's breaking voice say, "Lois's 8-month battle with cancer has ended. She went 'home' early this morning."

The first crazy thought that surfaced on hearing the devastating news of her death was, "There won't be any Christmas letter from her this year." What the letters meant to me finally started to become clear. While on the surface the poems expressed Lois's outrageous, fun-loving personality, there was always a strong undercurrent affirming faith as the central core of her life, and faith in Christ's incarnation at Christmas.

It was November and we were just on the verge of Advent, preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ child. We were preparing also to observe another event, the passage of Lois from this life to eternal life.

On her last Sunday on earth, Lois attended the All Saints' Day worship. She now had joined the departed saints. A week later, we were gathered at Holy Trinity with her friends and family for her memorial. I struggled with what I could say about my cousin during the

service sharing time. Peggy, Lois's daughter, leaned over the pew and whispered, "I found a box addressed to you at mother's home. In it was this disco ball that she had completed. I have it here for you." My answer about what to say was shaped by that intricate craft item.

We joined in the opening hymn "I Was There to Hear Your Burning Cry." Midway through the second verse the words crashed over me. "I'll be there to make your verses rhyme." I thought of all of the verses that Lois composed Christmas after Christmas, always awash with optimism on the surface, but honest to the pains, and trusting God to make sense out of her life. In all of her verses Lois conveyed the bottom line to her life. Her hope. As with the disco ball, there was a solid core beneath the surface "fluff" of the verses.

I rose to speak and share my grief with the other mourners. "Perhaps the most obvious thing you remember about Lois is that upbeat side that made you feel good when you were around her—her adventuresome spirit, her enthusiasm, her interest in others," I began. "Like this disco ball that was her last gift to me ... at first glance this disco ball seems to be nothing but froth. If you held it, though, you would feel the hard firm base underneath to which it is attached. It's what gives it shape and substance. What formed Lois? The core of Lois's life was based in her faith. Lois's rootedness was in Christ, who gifts us with hope. This was and is her solid core."

Had Lois written a Christmas poem this year, it might have ended something like this:

*From Eden God made promises to keep,
Emmanuel God-with-us even as we weep;
Incarnation fulfilled at Jesus' birth
Filled all creation with God's mirth.
Given our Comforter. Not left alone.
Take cheer for God has called me home.
To each of you whom I love
I wish peaceful hearts from our Savior above. LWT*



*Ellen
and the
"Disco Ball"
that Lois
made for
her.*

*Ellen
Fackler
Gamrath is
a freelance
writer and
frequent
contributor
to LWT.*

Dear ones,

Early in November, as we looked at our calendar, we decided that a Christmas newsletter just wouldn't fit in this year. Well, here it is Thanksgiving Eve, and we've changed our minds. I guess I wouldn't be sitting here writing if it didn't seem important to fit it in. Perhaps that's what Christmas is about—fitting in those things you don't think you have time for.

Each night at bedtime, the boys lean over the banister and call, "Come say good night." I often find myself scrambling to finish up the supper dishes, but I dry my hands and mount the stairs for our good-night ritual.

I hear Luke begin his routine recital of the Lord's Prayer, often in his rapid pace. I say, "Slow down and think about the words." He closes with, "And God bless everybody in the whole wide world."

As I move to the next bedroom I hear Nick closing his prayer in Steve's presence. I kiss Nick's forehead. With a final "Good night, I love you boys," I return to my now lukewarm dishwater. And I think, it wouldn't feel right if I hadn't fit in the good-night ritual.

My dad and mom just spent eight days with us. Dad came to complete the rewiring of our house. This stage required cutting holes in walls and ceilings. Now, as I sit here in the midst of post-project mess, I'm glad we fit in the rewiring. Mom and I had time to talk and rummage through secondhand shops. And Dad, a night owl, induced me into conversations that went far too late into the night. It was good to fit it all in.

As we began our cleaning spree last Saturday, I found it somewhat hard to dust away Mom's "We love you all" message written in the layer of dust on the quilt rack. I'm trying to ignore the work that awaits. Christmas is coming. How will we fit it in? Perhaps, just perhaps, it is in this everyday turmoil that Christmas awakens. May you find time to fit in those things that are really important, and may you value and reflect on them.

A final note: Somehow I'd like to think if I had been the inn keeper, I'd have fit in Mary and Joseph. Peace be with you,
Steve, Sandy, Nick, Luke

*Sandy Heer
and her family live in
Dubuque, Iowa. They are members
of Lord of Life Lutheran. This is an excerpt
from one of Sandy's Christmas letters.*

Blessings in the waiting

Marj Leegard

"God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient ..." (Galatians 5:22, Contemporary English Version). Just reading that makes me humble, for I want very much to be patient ... and it is very difficult. When our daughter was small I said to my husband, "Laurie has the impatience of her grandmother." Jerome said to me, "This may come as a shock to you, but impatience did not skip a generation."

This is a season of waiting. If you do not wait long enough for the syrup to cook to the correct temperature, your divinity candy will be sticky puddles and not tall bonbons with a curly tail on top. If peanut brittle is hurried it turns out to be peanut, impossible-to-chew taffy. If you bake your bread without giving it enough time to rise, it will end up heavy and coarse.

We waited when we were children. We waited in awful anticipation for the afternoon of the Sunday school program. Would the pieces we'd absolutely memorized somehow absolutely evaporate from our minds? Then the moment we had waited for came and we were ready. So ready that one recited her poem once, then looked out terrified at the audience, and decided the only thing to do was to recite the poem again (and again).

Waiting is difficult because we forget that waiting time is preparation time. Waiting is not a negative empty space. Waiting is anticipation and hope and review of promise. We endure the bubbling and the rising while we are cooking because we have a picture of the perfect finished promise. Yes, we endured the



**What are
you waiting
for this
Christmas?**

hours before the programs of our childhood because we had no choice, but also because there was that wonderful little box with the ribbon handle. Inside the box, for children who had no other access to candy, was the culmination of a year's longing for red and white and sweet and peppermint.

Waiting for the promise of God, for a Savior to come, should be easy. After all, we know how the story will turn out! Still we don't like to sing Advent hymns when the mall and stereo and TV have been singing of Christmas since the first of November. They, and we, know little of waiting.

Patience has a strong foundation—and that foundation is faith. Faith that waiting is not in vain. Faith that waiting is an essential part of the promise. Faith that, in the end, *God will!*

There are blessings in the waiting. There are holy moments in the Advent preparation. The music of Advent has its own beauty. "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" is most welcome when I have become mightily tired of "The Little Drummer Boy" and the partridge in the ubiquitous pear tree.

God's Spirit makes us patient. God's promises fulfill our time of waiting. God has come to dwell among us. And now we wait for our ultimate Christmas. Our time to dwell with God. **LWT**

LWT columnist Marj Leegard is a member of Bakke-Lund-Richwood parish in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Christmas love

Jeff Martinson



If I speak with the fire to put the fear of God into people, but have no Christmas love, it is a sorry and futile exercise. If I sing the alleluias of angels with the operatic soprano strength to break crystal, but have no Christmas love, it is ear-shattering noise. If I have faith so to move crowds in shopping malls, and throw my body into the fray and come out victorious with the hottest and most-coveted toy, but have no Christmas love, it is like giving old underwear.

Christmas love is surprisingly quiet and glorious. It cleans, bakes, shops, decorates and serves while praying Mary's *Magnificat*.

It does not boast of light displays. It is not envious of those who get brand names. It does not check price tags. It celebrates Emmanuel and facilitates goodwill.

Christmas love does not rejoice in abundant material things, and it weeps over selfishness. Christmas love rejoices when the hungry are filled up with good things, when the lonely are remembered, when Mr. Scrooge finds joy in giving, and angel Clarence gets his wings. Christmas love rejoices when guns

are laid down, when sisters and brothers embrace, when parents and children make peace, and when spouses hold hands.

Christmas love bears the heavy commercialism of the season for a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.

For the Word of God made flesh, Christmas love endures jingle bells, Grandma getting run over by reindeer, and nervous dinners with relatives of different political and football-team persuasions.

Christmas love shines through everything, including emergency rooms, public schools, nursing homes, prisons, factories, barns, and church programs. Christmas love hopes for softened, broken, and changed hearts.

Christmas love doesn't stop loving when other loves stop. As for sermons, they will end. As for Frosty, he will lose his popularity and melt down. As for hot toys and fashions, they will be forgotten, and the latest gadgets will become obsolete.

For we strive for happiness and fulfillment on this day and season, but when Christmas love comes, the rest of it can be hauled to the dump; for the thrill of the holidays cannot hold a candle to the love from God that is imperishable and eternal.

When I was a child, I believed in Santa Claus and that I would get presents if I was good. Now that I am an adult I am aware of the greater unconditional love of God. I see a mirror image of Christmas love in the faces of each person who acts out the drama of the Gospel story and sings "Silent Night" by candlelight.

One day I shall see Christmas love and Jesus face to face, just as shepherds and Wise Men did, and will be fully convinced of God's salvation for me and all humankind, through his only Son who died on the cross and rose again, even as I have been completely accepted by his grace.

And now dear friends, these remain: grace, peace, joy, and Christmas love; but the greatest of these is Christmas love, which God pours into the world each day—and into our hearts forever. **LWT**

Jeff Martinson is a Lutheran pastor serving in Frederick, S.D. He and his wife, Faith, have two children, Leif and Hope.

Everything was wrong, and everything was perfect

Christa von Zychlin



Nothing was right but all was perfect that first Christmas Eve, because God made it that way.

Old Irwin Burchess was a crusty sheep farmer I once knew in northwestern Ohio. Nothing had gone right in his life.

"Loved a girl and she ran off with his best friend," Lois, his sister, told me. "Things were never right again with him after that," she said.

So it was that Irwin lived with Lois on the old family farm, and now it looked as though the farm was going to have to be sold. Irwin had phlebitis so bad in his leg he could hardly walk at times. Getting up early in the bitter winds of February and March to help the ewes lamb was too much for him.

When I came to visit, I'd climb over the roots of the old oak tree planted in the middle of their driveway and head to the barn. When Irwin saw me coming he'd nod at me and ask, "Well, you wanna see somethin', Miss Pastor?" And he'd lead me into the barn, and there'd be newborn lamb twins, or even triplets. "That's somethin' to see now," he'd say. Looking at those lambs, stroking the cobbled, woolly nose of the mother ewe, we'd stand a minute in silence and then he'd repeat it. "That's somethin' to see now."

Everything was wrong in Irwin Burchess's life, but for the moment it was perfect. God made it that way.

Everything was wrong, too, that night in Bethlehem, the night Jesus was born. It was the wrong time, and wrong place, with the wrong people around. Still, God made it perfect.

The first thing that's wrong with the Christmas story is the timing. Mary is expecting a baby, and really, she and Joseph weren't properly married yet. And as everyone can see, she's big with child. Why did God choose to do it that way, and not wait until things could be done without all the neighbors talking?

Why the hurry? Why the secrecy and the scandal? Why hadn't God sent the angel Gabriel to the whole town of Nazareth to tell them all exactly how and why this Savior would be born? But, no, the angel came only to Mary, then later to Joseph, in a dream. But what better way to prepare Mary and Joseph for the scandal of a God who talks and cries and dies as a human being than to let them tough it out in front of a skeptical, conventional society? Mary and Joseph would be able to help teach their young son a few things about doing what's right according to God instead of according to what the neighbors might think! So the timing was all wrong, but God made the parents just right.

It was also the wrong place.

It was the wrong place because it was Bethlehem, and to this day Bethlehem is known as a small, grimy, littered place without a decent hotel or hospital. But most important, for Mary, is that Bethlehem was not home. A decree had gone out from Caesar Augustus, the Roman government, scattering folks across the country to register in their ancestral home ... probably so they could be counted on to pay more taxes!

When the government says move, you move. So Joseph and Mary moved. It didn't matter to Caesar that they were expecting a baby, their first.

But the Christmas story is much larger than one young couple—or even one family or one nice neighborhood. Mary and Joseph didn't know it then, but the trouble of a moment would be swallowed up in the light of eternity.

"That's something to see now."



Some 735 years before that night in Bethlehem, the prophet had foretold it: "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah. But the Lord will choose one of your people to rule the nation ..." (Micah 5:2, Contemporary English Version). So as for the place, God made it perfect.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. Joseph evidently thought they still had plenty of time. Maybe Mary did, too. It was their first baby, after all. But God's time was right, so Mary gave birth to her firstborn child and wrapped him in cloth. She laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

Nothing was right, you see. And none of the right people were around to help. Mother and sisters and aunts and trusted neighbors were far away. No people from the nice inn up the road came to help. Who wants to get involved with a young family, crying in the dark?

So the angels went to the countryside to find some people to comfort this young family, to find people who themselves had a hard enough life that they would "get it." Disreputable shepherds are who they found. A grizzled old man and his son, maybe, who hadn't had a bath in weeks, out there with the sheep.

These are the people God chooses to be the first greeters and nannies and worshipers of the Prince of Peace. These sheep farmers were all wrong for the part, but God made them perfect for the Christmas story.

"That's somethin' to see now," old Irwin Burchess used to say, picking up the smallest lamb. Maybe those are the same words the first shepherds used that holy night!

How about you this Christmas? Can you hear the sound of God wailing in the night? "I'm here! I'm with you!" God cries. Maybe things are wrong in your life. But this Christmas God shows you perfection. A baby is born who is God's own Son, Jesus. His full name is Wonderful Counselor ... Mighty God ... Everlasting Father ... Prince of Peace. And he's bringing grace and truth and life into this hard world.

That's something to see now. And it is all right. **LWT**

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She and her
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sons.*

TC'99 diary

Jennifer L. Williams

One convention-goer relates her memories of the Fourth Triennial Convention, held in St. Louis on July 8-11, 1999.—Ed.



WEDNESDAY, JULY 7

Get up at 4 a.m. to finish packing; Mom helped with most of it last night. I'm ready to get to St. Louis!

Dad drives me to Charlotte airport, leaving Kannapolis at 6 a.m. Turns out that I'm seated next to Diana, one of the delegates from my SWO (North Carolina Synodical Women's Organization).

Airport in St. Louis is chaotic, but greeters holding "Women of the ELCA" signs guide us to the baggage claim and hotel shuttle. I sit next to a delegate from Alaska! Within minutes, we're in sight of the Arch.

Arrive at my hotel before my room is ready, so have lunch with Diana, then tour the Arch. Tram to the top is hot and crowded, but the view is incredible! Marvel at humankind's ingenuity, and the Mississippi River reminds me of God's constant presence.

Attend staff meeting for *Triennial Times* (I'm volunteering as a reporter for the daily news). I will help cover workshops and the "Convention without Walls."

THURSDAY, JULY 8

The hotel restaurant is packed, so I head out to find a coffee shop along the way to the America's Center—"convention central."

Opening worship begins at 8:30 a.m., so I have time to swing by the Augsburg Fortress convention store; it's HUGE! Buy a book for myself and, for Mom, a dove-shaped pin made in Bethlehem.



St. Louis arch



Linda Chinnia,
newly elected president of Women of the ELCA



*Myrlie Evers-
Williams*

Worship is wonderful—just singing and praying with so many women of all ages from so many places brings tears to my eyes. Love hearing Mercy Oduyoye's accent-ed English.

The exhibit hall, called "Hall of Justice," is amazing. I love the "freebies." Pick up CDs from the Lutheran Vespers booth and sip coffee from the Lutheran World Relief display.

Eat lunch with Sarah Ellen, who edited the *Carolina Vine* (our SWO's newsletter) before me. She takes a break from the on-line chat station.

Then I hear former NAACP chair Myrlie Evers-Williams speak. I'm in awe. She has lived through so much hatred and had to confront her own hatred after her husband was murdered. "God is the potter ... we are the clay. He can make a beautiful vessel, but it is not strong until you put it in the fire," she says.

Back at the *Triennial Times* office, I type up an article on the "make your own video" booth. Then I'm off to the "It's NOT Pretty Woman" workshop. Leader Heidi Somerset survived 10 years of prostitution, drug addiction, and abuse at the hands of her husband/pimp. Her faith is strong, and it shines through her story.

FRIDAY, JULY 9

Start the day at a breakfast hosted by my SWO.

Go to ELCA vice president Addie J. Butler's workshop on her life journeys, where she encourages us to share ours. She uses the lyrics from "I Was There to Hear Your Burning Cry"—one of my favorite hymns. Also attend a great workshop for newsletter editors. Rush to the presentation of in-kind gifts; what generosity!

Have lunch and then go to Bible study. Stacy Kitahata, dean of community at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and international students review the text of Micah.

Former U.S. senator Paul Simon confronts us with sobering statistics, challenging us to be involved with the government on all levels, and encourage us to "find the positive" instead of criticizing. "If a 13-year-old boy throws a rock through a church's stained-glass



Stacy Kitahata

window, you can rest assured the window will be fixed. However, you can rest less assured that the 13-year-old boy will be fixed," he says.

SATURDAY, JULY 10

Get to sleep in, as my "Convention without Walls" opportunity takes place at the adjacent hotel. "Women and Children Living in Poverty" made me put on my thinking cap: had to think of community resources for women in precarious situations.

Go back to the *Triennial Times* offices to write up my CWW and workshop experiences. Walk to Laclede's Landing, also known as St. Louis's "French Quarter," and have dinner with new friends from the convention.

SUNDAY, JULY 11

Get up the earliest since I've been here yet—to pack, check out, check in my suitcase at the America's Center, then attend the *Lutheran Woman Today* coordinators' breakfast (all by 7:15 a.m.).

The final worship service and Bishop Anderson's sermon are an inspiring send-off. Will greatly miss the *Triennial Times* staff, as most of them work in Chicago, and I'm hundreds of miles to the south. Hopefully I'll see them before the next triennial, set for 2002 in Philadelphia. Until then, "Live God's Justice!" **LWT**



Jennifer L. Williams is a graduate student and an administrative assistant at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is a member of New Hope Lutheran Church in Kannapolis, N.C.

Learn more about Women of the ELCA's Fourth Triennial Convention in St. Louis (held July 8-11, 1999):

- Check out the Web site at www.elca.org/wo/tc99/
- Request the three issues of *Triennial Times*, the daily news produced at convention, with a suggested \$2 donation to cover postage and handling.
- Request the July/August 1999 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*, which contains the two-session "Live God's Justice" Bible study by Stacy Kitahata. Single copy, \$1. Send requests for *Triennial Times* and *LWT* to Bette Bruce, Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189.



Scholarships make a difference

Are you at this very moment in the midst of the bustle of Christmas—what to bake, how much to decorate, what to buy for everyone? If so, stop!

Take a moment, sit down, and read on, because a gift to someone you don't know just might be the way to mark the meaning of the season.

Each year at this time we share information about how many women received scholarships through Women of the ELCA, the variety of career paths represented by recipients, the total amount of dollars given, and the regions and synods where recipients live.

These scholarships will continue to be a reality, and we're all thankful for that. However, because the cost of higher education continues to increase, a second reality is this: fewer women will be able to receive scholarships unless the principal in each fund is increased. Increased principal means increased interest, and it is the yearly interest on each fund that determines the dollar amounts available for scholarships.

Of course, because all funds are invested, that amount also depends on the stock market and interest rates. In 1994, the interest yielded \$22,200 and we were able to give 16 scholarships, most for \$1,000. In 1998 the yield was very good and the interest on the funds totaled \$39,093; we were able to give 23 scholarships!

Women of the ELCA has a number of scholarship funds available for Lutheran laywomen.

- The Mary Seeley Knudstrup Memorial Fund helps ELCA women preparing for occupations for Christian service through graduate study.
- The Belmer Fund and The Flora Prince Memorial Fund help ELCA women studying for ELCA services abroad.
- The Amelia Kemp Scholarship helps ELCA women of color in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study.
- The Kahler Fund, Vickers/Raup Memorial Fund, and Emma Wettstein Fund help ELCA women studying for service in health professions linked with ELCA projects abroad.

- The Cronk Memorial Fund, First Triennial Board Fund, General Scholarship Fund, Mehring Fund, Paepke Scholarship Fund, Piero/Wade/Wade Fund, and Edwin/Edna Robeck Estate Fund help ELCA women in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study.

For Lutheran women who are second-career students at an ELCA seminary and preparing for ministry in the ELCA, there is the Herbert and Corinne Chilstrom Fund. The applicant for this must be endorsed by her Synodical Candidacy Committee.

This year Women of the ELCA had the joy of presenting a new scholarship—The Arne Administrative Leadership Scholarship Fund—to provide help to Lutheran women preparing for administrative positions. Course work may be for an administrative degree, certification, or continuing education.

The recipient of any of these scholarships must be a member of an ELCA congregation; involvement in the women's organization is desirable.

In addition, each year we are able to present three or four scholarships from the Schmeider Fund for Leadership to senior women faculty or staff at Lutheran colleges or seminaries—women administrators and faculty who are being encouraged by the president of the institution to move into a leadership role.

Given the wonderful ministry that takes place through these scholarships, why not make a difference in someone's life and begin your Christmas by sending a monetary gift to one of the scholarship funds? For more information, contact the Women of the ELCA office at 800-638-3522, ext. 2736. Or send a check made out to Women of the ELCA, noting the name of the scholarship fund on the memo line. Mail to Women of the ELCA Scholarships, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. **LWT**

Blessed Christmas!

*Faith Fretheim
Program director, Women of the ELCA*

SCHOLARSHIP TIMELINE FOR 2000-2001

- Request an application by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2747.
- Applications must be postmarked no later than February 15, 2000 and sent to SCHOLARSHIPS, Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189.
- Applicants receive written notice of committee's decisions by May 25, 2000.

Underlines

WAYS TO USE LWT

God remembers (November 1999)

The November issue reminds us to remember! In "A remembering people" (p. 3), Cotton Fite offers thanksgiving for the faithfulness of a particular friend. Valora Starr Butler's "More than memories" (p. 9) testifies eloquently to the powerful example set by Grandma Betty. Ask women in your group to think of an individual who has nurtured their faith and bring to the next meeting a story or an object that reminds them of that person. Allow time for sharing stories of these important people and offering thanksgiving for their influence.

Paul Nelson's November column on worship focuses on the Festival of All Saints. Does your congregation remember the lives of members who have died since the last All Saints' Day? If not, consider sharing the article with your pastor and members of the worship committee so that this meaningful tradition may become one of your own.

Elizabeth M. Hunter (November, p. 6) gives us a treasure trove of ideas for purposefully remembering moments of God's grace in our lives. Read the suggestions on pages 7-8 aloud at your next meeting. Ask



each person to choose an idea from the list that she will carry out during the next month (the memory quilt and cookbook might be group projects). Allow time at your next meeting for reports on the blessings noticed and passed on to others as members did their "homework."

Fear not! (December 1999)

Do you have a friend who might be helped by reading Donna Hacker Smith's "Fear not fear" (December, p. 6)? Clip it out and send it with a prayer and a note of encouragement. Or perhaps you were helped by one of the suggestions in Tom McGrath's "Ten ways to disarm your fear" (p. 11). Consider sharing his article (and your own story) with someone who might be helped by these wise suggestions.

May we be strengthened by our reflection on these two issues of *LWT*, so that we can sing to God with confidence, "For when your hand is guiding, In peace I go" (*Lutheran Book of Worship* 333). *LWT*

*Barbara Hofmaier
Director for educational
resources, ELCA*

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